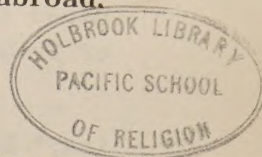


"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin



Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1201, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Number 7

December 1935

THE FAITH MAN SHARES WITH BEAST AND TREE *

By Warren H. Wilson

In our efforts to save and develop the country churches in America we feel ourselves baffled; and in the extension of equal gospel privileges to the rural peoples on foreign fields we have made only a hesitant beginning. We are repeating the history of past times; for Sorokin and Zimmerman say in their chapter on "Rural-Urban Religious Culture," - "We know that Christianity originated in the city and spread (to the country)....The class which resisted it most bitterly, which was last turned to Christianity, was the class of peasantry....The most stubborn resistance to Christianity comes from the country people." And later "the religions created by the agricultural peoples have been 'agricultural' in their nature."

It seems to the many authorities quoted by this compiler that the city people are humane, their whole life being immersed in human contacts; while the country people are biological, because their whole life is spent in contacts which we could describe as biological. They associate all the hours of the day with trees and plants, beasts and fowls; and only to a small degree, for a limited number of waking hours, with men.

Would it not be worth while, therefore, to ask whether there is a religion of trees and beasts? Could we for a few minutes look upon all living creatures as of equal worth in the sight of God? Let us dismiss for a while our belief that man is a favored species in religion, and let us think religiously as a countryman, a herder of sheep, a cattleman, a gardener, a forester—or even just as a suburban dweller who poetically loves the country. To all these who see the living beings about them, man is no better than the rest, has no preference in the race; the cold kills him or the sun scorches him, the water will drown him or the wind will buffet him, just as all these battle with one another and with all the other species. The sentimentalist and the poet have voiced the religion of the trees. But there is today a new situation, created by three changes—to mention no more.

First, the so-called Country Life Movement has in one generation spread all over the world, engaging minds as diverse as those of President Theodore Roosevelt and Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India—both of them breaking their urbane silence a quarter-century ago. This hunger of nobler minds for the country is a new thing, not much more than a century old; but it summons eyes to look for evidences of spiritual life in the country.

Second, country dwellers have fallen heir to the studies of scientific workers, in the biological fields especially, who have illuminated life with order and regularity, protected it from sentimentality and superstition and pre-

*Paper read at the First Annual Meeting of the Christian Rural Fellowship, New York, December 5-7, 1935.

pared the way for philosophy and religion to learn from living things--no longer from mechanical process alone.

Third, in the latest of great books, "The Meaning and Truth of Religion," by Eugene Lyman, the author follows the lead of writers on "the new physics," who say through him that "matter is never inert" and "the stuff of the world is mind-stuff." "Matter always is sentient." In other words all the trees and beasts which a countryman has to do with are possessed of a measure of sense. Dr. Bose, the Indian scholar and Nobel prize man, proved that plants have nerves and a rudimentary circulation, they are sensitive mediums of this "mind-stuff" which Eddington finds even in rocks and astronomical gases.

I do not think that any old countryman would be surprised to be told that his cattle, his favorite horse and his dog, have sense. And if you told him that you thought they had religion, he would nod his head and give instances. He knows that plants and trees fight a battle in the woods and that the most cunning are bound to win. Why then should not the Bible writers pay tribute to the religious significance of the plants, and the bees!

There is a deeply felt longing after God, expressed in our time by some wisest souls. Will it not be necessary for us to reach out with them beyond mankind and take our place, with other species, on a level before God, that we may free ourselves from the narrow preferences of many Christians. With scientific materials to enlarge our minds, scientific methods to guard us from superstition, can we not in these times look to trees and beasts as "our poor earth-born companions?"--as a farmer once called them--and ask them to tell us about God? Can we indeed ever attend to God while we entertain the narrow, short-sighted view that man alone has worth on this earth and that he is at liberty to dominate and exploit it?

In his late book on "Morality and Religion" Bergson declares that "all morality....is in essence biological." On the next page he faces the question I am discussing, whether there is a religion of trees and beasts, and he evades it with what seems to be a smart and equivocal sentence; but later in his discussion of primitive religion, he says, "morality is co-extensive with religion;" so that it would seem that this much-quoted writer has kept himself in line with the writer of the dramatic poem of "Job" who commended the religious worth of certain beasts; and Bergson has not cut himself off from our Lord, who made remarks about the sparrow and the lily having a piety satisfactory to the Creator.

It must be remembered that in the researches of the biologists, man is only another species. He has no favor, and is not exempt from the generalizations. What is learned in dissecting man has been used in understanding all vertebrates; and the anatomy of dogs, the physiology of horses are usefully studied in protecting man against his and their diseases. Volumes are delighting our eyes in these days, in which the exploits are told of those fighters of microbes who pursue their quarry along a path from man to beast and from beast to man.

There is one consideration, however, that has detained us and precluded our recognition that beasts and trees have religious value. We have domesticated beasts and plants. They have entered with us into cooperative service of mankind. They have taken on a kind of human understanding. Then we have pets about us. The dog prefers our company to that of his own kind. There are plants which no longer reproduce outside our fields and gardens.

These creatures confirm us in believing that on this earth mankind is a sort of God. If we are to look up beyond man and his admirable traits we must take our place side by side with the wild and untamed species. You will note that it was not the pet horse that the inspired writer commended, but the wild ass. It was not the water-buffalo but Behemoth--whoever Behemoth was, he was no pet lizard! Only from the other species in their wild state can we learn about their relation to God. So long as they look to man for their protection and maintenance they will have no other religion. His myopic vision will shorten their vision.

You remember that the old Hebrews used to think that only the Jew had God's interest and favor. Jesus observed that when they made a convert, they "made him more a child of Hell than themselves." I suppose he meant that a Jewish proselyte was more convinced than a born Jew that the Jews were the chosen people. So it is that a pet or a domesticated plant in your garden will tell you nothing about God, but only confirm you in the urbane idea that man is God's preferred species.

Permit me then to mention the religious experiences which we have in common with trees and beasts. The first is death, which is the central experience of the Christian religion, central motive of the poet's song. Whitman calls it "the low and delicious word, death," which he heard the sea answer back to the bird that had lost its mate. This we have to endure with all living. And the second is the unity of life and death. For each species reproduces abundantly and each feeds upon the abundance of other species. Only by this tragic dependence upon slaying can any living species live. And man is no exception. He slays and shall be slain. And the third is the unity of the life of man with the life of beasts. He may weep with Blake over the rapacity of the tiger while he is digesting his breakfast of living fruits, or meats, that lived yesterday, before they were slain for his nutriment.

The fourth common utensil in which man and the trees and the brutes carry on the will of God is heredity. In the process of heredity the germ-plasm lives and carries on immortally the traits which each perishing individual displays in his brief life-time.

The fifth is the obedience to law and order. So assiduous a slavery is this that the student has only to see one specimen well and he may know all individuals; and he can learn from one physiological process, perhaps of a monkey, what will be the physiological reaction of man, and it may be of half a score of other species.

It would seem to me that there is a sixth vessel of divinity in man and the beasts; which is called variously instinct or intelligence. Tell me how the trees in a wood devise a way to get their leaves up to the light; and tell me how the vine reaches out from my fence to catch and climb the pear tree and you will have described what I mean. It is by the same cunning that one goat of a herd gets the best grazing and by the same instinct one business man succeeds where others are crowded to the wall. I know there is a difference between instinct and intelligence; but I have not been told what it is in so convincing a manner as to cut the two apart.

And strange as it may seem, Bergson makes religion express, not intelligence first, but emotion and custom and morality; which all have their sources in instinct. So that it may be after all that the lilies which Jesus said had been clothed by the Heavenly Father, have a stretching-up to God in

response, that is quite as religious as your rising for the hymn and kneeling for the prayer.

Anyway, whatever we may agree upon, in the interest of rural religion, we will be correcting the myopia of our ancestors. For man and all other species believe that theirs is the only species—all others being accursed, suitable for food, but to be destroyed. This was the belief of ancient Greeks, and all who were not Greeks were "barbarians." This was the view of ancient Jews, and all others were "heathen." This has been, I am told, the belief of every American Indian tribe; the very name Navajo being equivalent to "God's People." Just so it has been our custom to speak of the other species as "brutes." By this term we have put them out of divine consideration, away from the right to mercy, which children of God claim.

Country dwellers are not without this narrowness. I am not for a moment claiming for farmers a wider vision than is common among other men. But now that city people are going out to the country, with an eager eye to its beauty, perhaps they will be willing to see there what our worshippers saw. Perhaps they will read Professor Lyman's chapter on "Panpsychism" and dare to look at a tree for its spirit, to attend to wild birds in hopes of catching, as Whitman caught, the passion of death and the joy of life in their worshipping songs, the manner of heaven which the poets have caught from the fluttering of their wings. The city man going into the country is led there by a spiritual desire. Farmers are not. They seek an economic satisfaction. They go to the country to find food and to make money. But the city dweller has a spiritual motive. He need not be afraid any longer of the superstitions of the animists who may still dwell there. Modern science will provide him, and the animists too, with all the scepticism required to protect them against superstition. So let him look for the spiritual in trees and plants, for the mentality in beasts. Where mind is, and surely where instinct is, there God's light shines. The missionary says this for himself; let him say it for the beasts. They will need religion, if the people who tend them are to continue to have any faith. There has got to be a larger faith than our shopworn and ragged humanist Christianity, or we will all be agnostics. And if we can find our new godliness in the country, where all species are together and all are on an equality, it will soon receive the acceptance of farmers, shepherds and villagers. For they know they share a common life, they know that all breed alike, feed alike and that all species alike shall die and feed the hungers of other "earthborn companions."

The philosophers are always reminding us that we prefer those experiences which we share with the fewest. That is, the tastes we most enjoy are preferences for what is most rare. We prefer by preference myopic, short-sighted. It is true that thus we love the awareness of God; for we become humane, urbane, nationalistic, domestic, selfish—ever more narrowing our preferences. To dwell with God we must get out into the country, till the ground, range the forests, study the wild birds, by efforts of attention pass into the soil and be one with the digging insects and earthworms—trying always to take an equal footing with these beings, our companions in life. God seems to regard with such tender esteem and clothe with such perfection; whose mentality he seems to consult with such respect; their tragedy like the tragic experience of man he dignifies in that he bore it on the cross in the death of his only Son, for the salvation of the world.

To do so may be our necessary fate in the near future, whether we desire it or not. These cities cannot carry on forever. Man cannot eat mankind. Human contacts, exclusively endured, make women bear fewer children and cause increasing numbers to go mad, suicides to be increased and life to have no more value to man. It is well that in our time the intelligent have discovered the country way of life. It is none too soon. From the cities families are streaming out to the lands. Perhaps we may recover for our stock the gusto for life; perhaps our race may decide not to commit suicide. Perhaps those who read books and call themselves Christians may learn the biological joys, oldest and best satisfactions of man and of beast; and practice biological morality, the most fundamental of ethical values. But to do so will be impossible without a clear recognition that the trees stand before God and reach up to him—which is all we can do to please him. And until we are willing to take our place alongside the beast, we can find no life suitable for the humility of true godliness. Until we can call the soil holy we have not made anything sacred; we will be ourselves accursed, our life profane, our hopes futile. The country way of life is the source, therefore, not only of our food but also of the creative and the ultimate appetite for life here and life hereafter.